

## George H. W. Bush: Foreign Affairs—Miller Center



During his presidency, President Bush devoted much of his time to foreign affairs, an area over which Presidents generally have more latitude than they do with domestic affairs. In his first inaugural address, Bush spoke of unity between the executive and legislative branches in foreign affairs, presenting a united front to the rest of the world and referring to a time when "our differences ended at the water's edge." He also put together a team of advisers, including National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, Secretary of State James Baker, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, who generally worked well together. President Bush approached foreign affairs with his characteristic conservatism and pragmatism. He did not rush into new actions or policy changes but gave himself time to consider the administration's policies. When he acted, he did so with firm conviction and determination. His past experiences gave him significant experience in foreign affairs, and he relied on the many contacts within the international community he formed as ambassador to the United Nations, U.S. envoy to China, director of Central Intelligence, and Vice President.

One example of Bush's conservative and pragmatic approach to foreign affairs occurred early in his

administration. In June 1989, the Chinese military suppressed a pro-democracy movement demonstrating in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Using tanks and armored cars, the military crushed the demonstrations and fired into the crowd, killing hundreds of protestors. Although Bush abhorred the Chinese government's violent crackdown in Tiananmen Square, he did not want to jettison improved U.S.-Sino relations by overreacting to events. Many in Congress cried out for a harsh, punitive response to the Chinese government's killing of peaceful protestors, but the Bush administration imposed only limited sanctions. Later in his administration, Bush sent Brent Scowcroft and Lawrence Eagleburger, deputy secretary of state, to China to try to repair the damaged, but not destroyed, relationship. In the end, U.S.-Sino relations, while always somewhat fragile, have generally thrived, particularly in the economic realm, where both nations have benefitted from a robust trading partnership.

## **Panama**

Throughout the Cold War, the United States had been involved in trying to stop the spread of Communism in Latin America and had established contacts throughout the area. One U.S. informant was Manuel Noriega, a Panamanian who began to work for the CIA as early as the late 1960s. Bush first encountered Noriega as director of the CIA when the agency relied on the Panamanian for intelligence. The Reagan administration initially saw Noriega as an ally because he opposed the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. When Noriega began to aid the Sandinistas and became increasingly involved in the international drug trade, the U.S. government tried to cut its ties with him. But Noriega continued to increase his power within Panama; in 1983 he assumed control of the Panamanian military, becoming a military dictator who essentially ruled the country. After Noriega was indicted by a federal grand jury in 1988 on drug trafficking charges, his relationship with American military and intelligence agencies came increasingly under fire by congressional Democrats. Members of Congress demanded that the Reagan administration and later the Bush administration bring the Panamanian strongman to justice.

Following the loss of Noriega's puppet candidate in the May 1989 Panamanian presidential election, Noriega nullified the results and his supporters attacked the opposition candidates. President Bush was appalled by Noriega's thwarting of democracy and began to focus on removing him from power. In October, information about an internal coup reached the U.S. military in Panama but the Bush administration chose not to get involved because the plan seemed sketchy and unorganized. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recounted that, "The whole affair sounded like amateur night." The coup failed, and Noriega's forces executed the coup leader. Reaction in the United States was harsh, and many critics took the President to task for missing an opportunity to remove Noriega. After the attempted coup, President Bush and his advisers realized that they had to do something definite about Noriega. He then ordered his foreign affairs team to put together a plan to remove the dictator from power.

In December 1989, the Bush administration was notified that Noriega's military forces had killed a U.S. serviceman and attacked another serviceman and his wife. The administration now believed that it had the justification it needed to remove Noriega from power. On December 20, the U.S. military launched

"Operation Just Cause" with about 10,000 forces landing in Panama and joining the 13,000 already there to quickly overtake the Panamanian military. Noriega went underground and eventually took refuge at the Vatican's embassy in Panama City. He surrendered to U.S. forces in early January and was taken to Miami, Florida, where he was eventually convicted on drug charges and sent to prison.

"Operation Just Cause" was generally hailed as a success and bolstered Bush's reputation as a strong, decisive leader. It was the largest military troop deployment since the Vietnam War and resulted in few casualties and a U.S. victory. Although it violated international law and was denounced by the Organization of American States and the United Nations, polls indicated that a large majority of Panamanians supported the U.S. invasion. The operation also gave the administration the unintended benefit of improving its crisis management, which helped the Bush team months later when Iraq invaded Kuwait.

### **End of the Cold War and Changing U.S.-Soviet Relations**

When Bush became President in 1989, the United States had already begun to see a thawing of relations with the Soviet Union. As vice president, he attended the December 1988 summit between President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. Bush spoke of softening relations in his inaugural address, claiming that "a new breeze is blowing," and adding that "great nations of the world are moving toward democracy through the door to freedom."

Bush's relationship with Gorbachev began with what the Soviets called the *pauza* (pause). With his instinctual caution, the President wanted time to study the situation before moving forward with his own policy. Although the Soviets were concerned that Bush's *pauza* indicated a new direction in U.S. foreign policy, it actually helped consolidate the improved U.S.-Soviet relations.

When East Germany opened its borders and Germans tore down the Berlin Wall separating East and West Berlin in early November 1989, it marked a symbolic end to Communist rule in Eastern Europe. In the minds of many, the Cold War was over. Bush offered a muted response at a press conference on November 9: "I'm very pleased." When the press questioned his lack of enthusiasm over the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Bush responded by stating, "I am not an emotional kind of guy." In retrospect, many people recognized that by refusing to gloat or declare victory over the Soviet Union, Bush probably helped avoid a backlash by hardliners in Eastern Europe. He also did not want to endanger future negotiations with the Soviet Union. Still, Bush's restrained response to the collapse of Communism in Europe, while diplomatically deft, cost him dearly at home among his conservative supporters who argued that Ronald Reagan would have celebrated this historic development with some type of public address.

In a December 1989 summit between Bush and Gorbachev in Malta, the two leaders discussed arms reductions and strengthening their relations. At a summit in Washington, D.C., in June 1990, the two men signed a broad arms reduction agreement in which the United States and Soviet Union consented

to decreasing their nuclear arsenals. Bush and his secretary of state, James Baker, worked hard to establish a meaningful relationship with Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet foreign minister. By most accounts, they were very successful in redefining relations with the Soviet Union in a post-Cold War environment. In July 1991, Bush met Gorbachev in Moscow and signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, known as START.

When Gorbachev's opponents attempted a coup to oust him from power the next month, the Bush administration waited anxiously for the outcome. The coup failed, and Gorbachev resumed his position but the Soviet Union was in evident decline. Throughout the fall, the Soviet Republics began to declare their independence from the Soviet Union, and in December, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus announced they were forming a new confederation of states. Gorbachev resigned as the President of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991.

The efforts of Bush, Gorbachev, Baker, and Shevardnadze achieved results in improving U.S.-Soviet relations in ways that would have been unthinkable ten years earlier. Critics of the Bush administration faulted it for being aligned too closely with Gorbachev and too willing to compromise; many thought that Bush should have made more overtures to Boris Yeltsin, the President of Russia who often wanted reforms to proceed more quickly than Gorbachev and eventually oversaw much of Russia's transition away from Communism. Nonetheless, Bush's relationship with Gorbachev helped facilitate improved U.S.-Soviet relations.

### **German Unification**

Events in 1989 moved along at such a rapid pace that President Bush's natural inclination toward gradual change was severely challenged. After the Berlin Wall fell in November of that year, members of the Bush administration discussed German reunification as some future reality, perhaps even five years in the future. Very few people imagined that a unified Germany would exist in less than a year. Even more surprising was that a united Germany would become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

After the Berlin Wall came down, a remarkable number of challenges confronted the Bush administration. At first, there were three main proposals on how to proceed with German reunification. One was just to let the two Germanys determine the process, but because of agreements at the end of World War II, the four victors—the United States, Soviet Union, Britain, and France—still had input into Germany's situation. Another approach was to let the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and its thirty-five members hammer out the details. However, this plan was not widely supported because of the likelihood that the process would bog down due to input from so many countries. A third suggestion was to involve the two Germanys with the World War II victors in a framework that became known as "Two-plus-Four."

In February 1990, the "Two-plus-Four" approach was formally approved. East and West Germany dealt

with the internal details while the four victors of World War II worked with the two Germanys on external issues. The talks began in May and finally concluded in September 1990. The main sticking point to German reunification was whether the country would be part of NATO. The Soviets initially opposed having a united Germany as part of NATO, preferring it to be part of the Warsaw Pact or exist as a neutral, non-aligned country. In the end, the Bush administration helped broker a compromise: Germany would be part of NATO but no NATO troops would be stationed in East Germany. In addition, Soviet troops would have three to four years to withdraw from East Germany, and Germany agreed to provide economic assistance to the Soviet Union.

### **Persian Gulf War**

On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded its neighbor Kuwait. Saddam Hussein, the President of Iraq, had long held designs on Kuwait's land, wealth, and oil. Although intelligence agencies had watched Iraq's military buildup along its border with Kuwait, both the United States and Iraq's Arab neighbors did not believe that Hussein had plans to invade the small country to its south. But they misread Hussein's intentions. The invasion violated international law, and the Bush administration was alarmed at the prospect of Iraq controlling Kuwait's oil resources.

Despite being somewhat caught off guard, the Bush administration went to work immediately trying to assemble a coalition to oppose Iraq. One fortunate turn of events for the administration was that, at the time of the invasion, President Bush was with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain at a conference, and Secretary of State Baker was in Siberia with Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet foreign minister. This allowed the United States to issue strong condemnations against Iraq with Britain, and most surprisingly, the Soviet Union. James Baker credited this moment, when the United States and Soviet Union issued a joint statement condemning Iraq's actions, as the end of the Cold War because it marked the beginning of unprecedented cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union.

When the invasion began, Arab countries joined with the United States to form a coalition to convince Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait or face the consequences. When Saudi Arabia became concerned about a possible invasion after Iraqi troops began to mass on the border, President Bush announced the deployment of U.S. troops to the desert kingdom. He also articulated the four principles that guided "Operation Desert Shield": the immediate and complete withdrawal of Iraq from Kuwait; the restoration of the legitimate Kuwaiti government; the stability and security of the Middle East; and the protection of Americans abroad.

On the day of the invasion, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 660, which condemned the invasion and demanded that Iraq withdraw "immediately and unconditionally". The United States also quickly moved to freeze Kuwaiti and Iraqi assets. Shortly thereafter, the UN imposed economic sanctions on Iraq designed to try to convince Iraq to withdraw. The Iraqi invasion allowed President Bush to emphasize one of his greatest strengths—personal diplomacy. He had many international contacts, and he personally telephoned world leaders and U.S. allies to start building the

coalition that would force Iraq to withdraw. However, the administration did not want Israel to join the coalition because it feared that Israel's involvement would alienate the Arab countries that had already agreed to join the alliance. Israel agreed to stay out of the coalition and not retaliate if attacked in order to allow the coalition's greater resources to deal with Hussein.

After months of resolutions and diplomatic efforts, the situation still had not changed. Iraq seemed unwilling to withdraw from Kuwait, and the Bush administration was not convinced that the economic sanctions could convince Hussein otherwise. In November, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 678, which authorized member states "to use all necessary means" to make Iraq withdraw from Kuwait if it had not done so by January 15. As the deadline loomed, the President often spoke of the situation in moral terms and cast Saddam Hussein as the embodiment of evil, highlighting the dictator's human rights violations.

In December, President Bush put forth a proposal to ensure that the administration had exhausted all diplomatic efforts; he wanted war to be the last resort. Bush proposed sending Secretary of State Baker to meet with Hussein in Iraq to try to reach a solution. However, the President made it clear that there was no alternative to a complete and unconditional Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. Although Baker eventually met with Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz in Geneva, Switzerland, the negotiations went nowhere with Hussein rebuffing Bush's efforts. The administration also wanted to shore up support domestically for the impending military action so it turned to Congress for congressional authorization. Although some in the administration argued that it was unnecessary, others felt it was important to have Congress's support. On January 12, Congress narrowly voted to authorize the use of military force against Iraq. The vote was an important victory for President Bush.

"Operation Desert Storm" began on January 17, 1991, when U.S.-led coalition forces began massive air strikes against Iraq. The coalition launched the ground war on February 24 and quickly overwhelmed the Iraqi forces. Coalition troops reached Kuwait City by February 27, and a ceasefire was declared the next day. On March 3, General Norman Schwarzkopf, commander in chief of the U.S. forces, met with the Iraqi leadership to dictate the terms of the ceasefire. The war had ended in less than two months, and the Bush administration had successfully committed to the largest military action since the Vietnam War without getting bogged down or suffering high casualties. (One hundred and forty eight U.S. soldiers were killed in the Persian Gulf War.) On March 6, President Bush addressed a joint session of Congress and declared, "tonight Kuwait is free."

The Persian Gulf War helped restore the morale of the U.S. military and dampened memories of the Vietnam War. It also showed the possibility of what Bush referred to as the "New World Order," breaking down Cold War alliances and using peaceful nations to stand united against rogue states. The President successfully held together the coalition and even succeeded in having many of the coalition countries provide manpower (including France, Britain, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt) and financial support (including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Germany). Critics argued, however, that the victory was hollow because Saddam Hussein remained in power. They faulted Bush for not pursuing Hussein and his army

into Iraq and removing him from power. However, President Bush and his team had been clear from the beginning that their primary war aim was to make Iraq withdraw from Kuwait, and they achieved that goal. The removal of Hussein from power had never been one of the administration's war aims. Many in the administration argued that pursuing Hussein into Iraq and attempting to topple him from power would destabilize the region and lead to a lengthy military engagement.

### **The New World Order**

On September 11, 1990, President Bush addressed a joint session of Congress regarding the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and he discussed "an historic period of cooperation," which he called the New World Order. Bush claimed this new order would be:

Freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony.

Again, on January 16, 1991, in an address to the nation about the start of the Persian Gulf War, President Bush used the term in explaining the motivations and justifications for using force against Iraq: We have before us the opportunity to forge for ourselves and for future generations a new world order—a world where the rule of law, not the law of the jungle, governs the conduct of nations. When we are successful—and we will be—we have a real chance at this new world order, an order in which a credible United Nations can use its peacekeeping role to fulfill the promise and vision of the U.N.'s founders.

President Bush's New World Order involved collective security with multinational cooperation, and it broke down Cold War conceptions and created new allies. Many people debated whether the New World Order was a realistic foreign policy tenet or simply an idealistic approach to the future. Critics claimed that the Bush administration did not fully articulate the goals of the New World Order and how it hoped to accomplish them. Some were unsure whether the term was meant as a new approach or simply a catchphrase. Realists complained that it was hard to justify U.S. involvement in situations without a clear national interest. But others felt that once the Cold War ended, the United States had to take on a large role as a world leader to guard against human rights abuses, defend democratic regimes, and lead humanitarian efforts.

One example of the changing landscape of foreign policy was evident in the Middle East Peace process. In October 1991, the Bush administration, together with the Soviet Union and Spain, cosponsored a conference in Madrid, to try to reach consensus on moving the peace process forward. The United States had gained new legitimacy within the Middle East after the Persian Gulf War. Arab nations were more willing to work with the United States, and the thwarting of the Iraqi invasion had shown all participants the futility of force. After the Soviet Union joined with the United States in opposing Hussein, countries in the Middle East could no longer rely on the Soviet Union to counterbalance the United

States. Once the Arab countries could not depend on the Soviet Union to support them to block Israeli-U.S. initiatives, they had little choice but to try to resolve the situation. Although the Madrid conference did not result in any lasting agreements, it was an important step toward future peace agreements.

In Somalia and the former Yugoslavia, the Bush administration encountered some of the first challenges to the New World Order. Near the end of his term, President Bush committed U.S. troops to Somalia to help ease a humanitarian crisis after the breakdown of civil society and the onset of mass famine and starvation. Although the operation was initially successful in helping to feed the Somali people, President Bill Clinton ordered the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Somalia after eighteen U.S. soldiers were killed in Mogadishu, the country's capital, in October 1993. "Operation Restore Hope" left many people wondering whether the United States should intervene in other countries when U.S. interests were not clearly at stake.

When Yugoslavia began to break apart, the Bush administration had hoped to persuade the various players to avoid violence and bloodshed and proceed with the breakup using a democratic process. The administration also hoped to see the European Community take the lead in resolving a conflict occurring in its own backyard, especially because some European countries seemed to chafe under U.S. leadership during the Persian Gulf War. And although the United States worked with the EC and the UN to take political, diplomatic, and economic steps to try to stop the conflict from escalating, they were unsuccessful. Many of President Bush's advisers felt that military action in the former Yugoslavia would more likely resemble the morass of Vietnam rather than the success of the Persian Gulf War. When President Bush left office, the former Yugoslavia republics were in the midst of wars that would continue for years to come. Few argued that President Bush was solely responsible for preventing the violence in the former Yugoslavia; it was a complicated situation with many ethnic groups, divided factions, and long histories. But some people believed that if the United States had launched a strong military action, it could have prevented some of the atrocities that occurred. Others, however, contended that the U.S. military would have gotten bogged down in the area. The situation showed some of the weaknesses in the New World Order. James Baker wrote in his memoir that after the Cold War ended, the international community needed to create new institutions and processes to fill the void in the post-Cold War era; without them, no effective means existed to stop the onset of violence in the former Yugoslavia.